

The “HOURGLASS”

INTRODUCTION

One of the advantages of a Game-based Approach (GBA) is players learn the **game** (rather than just being taught technical stroking). Remember, this doesn't ever mean that the proper technique is not important or necessary. It just means that developmentally speaking, technique is **second** (following tactics), but never **secondary**.

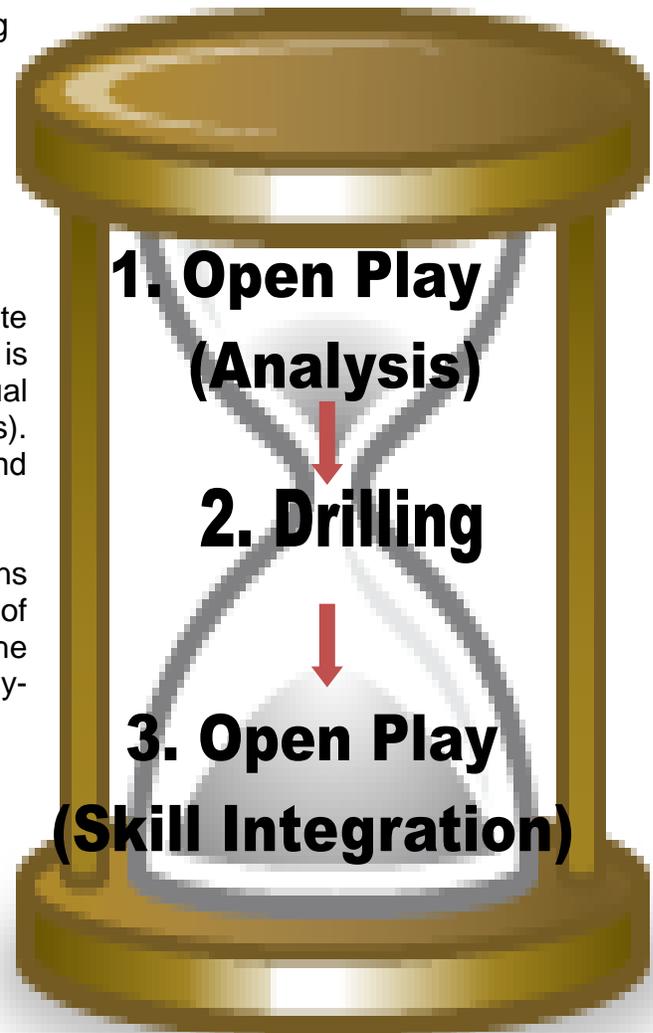
There is often a debate in the coaching community about having 'realistic' drills that are more 'open' versus basket or hand drilling which prioritizes technical repetition. These kind of either/or debates are not helpful. Obviously, the best coaching integrates both.

One of the most effective ways to integrate good tactical learning, as well as technical, is to use, “the Hourglass” in each individual training session (private or group lessons). This will give ‘the best of both worlds’ and incorporates a variety of learning strategies.

In its most basic form, the hourglass means starting with point-play, moving into a time of repetition drilling, and then integrating the skills practiced back into point-play (Play-Practice-Play).

All too often in lessons, players ask, “When can we play?” (especially juniors). Using the Hourglass means the coach can answer, “Right now!” Starting with play is fun and engaging. Players will see the direct, practical, relevance of the skills they are learning, since they experience real play.

Coaches will also get the benefit of seeing players perform realistic skills in live-play.



OPEN/CLOSED DEFINITIONS

You will notice the terms, “Open” and “Closed” in the steps. “Open” refers to the decision-making required in the situation. When a player must respond to a shot because they don’t know what is coming (Reception decision) and they get to decide where and how to send it (Projection decision), it is classified as an “Open” situation.

A “Closed” situation is one where the player knows what they will be receiving (e.g. the coach says, “You will be receiving a short ball in the middle of the court”). They also are told where they are supposed to hit it (e.g. “Take that middle ball and hit an inside-out Forehand deep into the opponents’ corner”). All the decisions are pre-set.

Open situations therefore tend to be more realistic, and closed tend to be more artificial. One is not ‘better’ than the other. Both are required for effective training although the ultimate goal is to be able to perform skills in Open situations since tennis is classified as a “Perceptual Motor Skill” and therefore an “Open Skill Sport”. (see acecoach video: “Tennis as an Open Skill”)

DETAILS OF THE HOURGLASS STEPS

On a more advanced coaching level, the Hourglass has **3 steps** (Keep in mind there still would be a warm-up step before the Open Play and a cool down/summary step after the play at the end of the session).

STEP 1: Open Play (Analysis)

The first part of the Hourglass is Open play. In other words, live point-play. Although this may seem easy to run, I have found this to be a very challenging step for most coaches to run *effectively*.

The challenge occurs because the main goal of this first step (from the coaches’ perspective) is to **analyze**. To analyze appropriately, the skill being analyzed needs to occur more than randomly. Depending on which situation is being analyzed, this can be problematic. For example, if the situation being analyzed is net play (handling a lob with an overhead smash), and players just play regular points, an overhead may never occur (so much for analyzing).

On the other hand, if the coach simply feeds lobs, it turns this first step into a drill (it is no longer open play). It is challenging for coaches to understand the ‘rules’ of play verses practice, and prevent the open play from crossing the line and becoming a practice drill. The coach needs to manipulate the Open play situation to ensure the skill is occurring enough to analyze.

Open play crosses the line and becomes a drill when:

- Players are told where to hit (decisions are pre-determined)
- Markers are used to designate targets and/or court positions
- Scoring: Players get points for other things besides winning points (e.g. bonus points for rallying, etc.)

- Coach feeds more than the first ball of a point

To properly manipulate the situation, two options are available for the coach. A coach may use one, or both to ensure the situation occurs enough for appropriate analysis:

1. **Modified Starting Point:** The coach can start the point at a different moment in the unfolding of a point. For example, if the coach wanted to analyze approaching the net situations, starting full points with serve may mean approaches rarely occur. The rule of thumb is, ***the more shots happening before the situation you want to analyze, the more likelihood you will not see the situation.*** In our approach example, the coach may imagine the serve and return have already occurred as well as some groundstrokes and elect to start the point with a short ball (then play the point out to conclusion). In this case, it is important to have players in realistic positions to begin the point.
2. **Impose Limitations:** The second option is to have 'limitations' that constrain the situation. For example, if the coach wanted to look at groundstroke passing shot situations, they may impose a limitation that players may not lob. This is not breaking the rule of pre-determining decisions since many other passing shots could be hit (drives at the player, dipping angles, drive down-the-lines, etc.).

Keep in mind that it is acceptable to skip the first step altogether if the coach has observed match play (even at another time). For example, the coach may have observed a tournament on the weekend and charted what was needed for analysis. When Monday practice rolls around, they could elect to start the session with step 2.

STEP 2: Drilling:

The thin middle of the Hourglass starts with 'Closed' drilling to maximize technical repetition and starts to build a bridge between learning skills and actually using them during point-play. A variety of feeding options are available for drilling (see acecoach, "The Feeding Ladder" article). It is very effective to set these drills in a progression from less realistic to more realistic. The two main categories of feeding are:

- a. **Dead-ball:** The definition of a 'Dead-ball' feed is the coach (or a player) sending the student the ball. This can be drop, hand or racquet feeding from a basket. The goal is to have maximum repetition in a short period of time. A great rule of thumb for volume is getting a minimum of 8-12 repetitions per player, per minute. In a very short time frame, hundreds of repetitions can be accomplished.
The most effective drills are about ***one element at a time.*** A coach can really dig into the details in this type of drilling and get very specific.
- b. **Live-ball drilling:** The definition of a "live-ball" is where you see your opponent receive a shot and hit it to you. For example, two players hitting continuous cross courts to each other would qualify as a Live-ball drill. Live-balls drills tend to be more realistic. They work well as a 'bridge' between Dead-ball drills and live play. Because the ball a player receives in a Live-ball drill can have more variation (in contrast to a Dead-ball being fed by a skilled coach), it creates a reception challenge (which adds to the realism).

This can add a layer of decision-making where the player must decide if, or when to use the skill learned.

STEP 3: Open Play: (Integration)

The bottom thick part of the Hourglass is about integrating the skills learned (and practiced in the thin part of the Hourglass) into live play. The simplest process is to re-play the exact same points, in the same format, that were played at the beginning of the session. The advantage is it provides a direct before/after comparison.

It is acceptable to break one rule and give bonus points for performing (or trying) the skills learned, since integrating is the priority of this step. Without this step the player has no emotionally safe, supervised time, to experiment with their new skills. With this step in place, players can be set free to use their new skills with guidance from the coach.

UNFOLDING OF A LESSON

This is an example of how the steps would time out in typical training sessions of various durations:

Step	1 hr session	90 min session	2 hr session
Warm-up	10 Min	15 Min	15 Min
Step 1: Open Play (Analysis)	10 Min	15 min	20 Min
Step 2: Drilling	25 Min	40 Min	60 min
Step 3: Open Play (Integration)	10 Min	15 Min	20 Min
Cool Down/Summary	5 Min	5 Min	5 Min

CONCLUSION

The advantage of the entire hourglass process is to learn skills (drawn out of play) and apply them directly to play (Game-based). All too often, coaches teach skills in lessons, and then abandon players to try to struggle with applying the skills on their own when they play. Or, they do have a time of play at the end but, it is often “purposeless play” and not connected to the skills they have been drilling all session. Both of these create such a large gap between learning (in a safe, controlled environment), and playing (in an unaided, pressured environment), that players don’t use the new skills they learn.

Using the hourglass for lessons and training sessions provides all the benefits of realism, high volume repetition, open play analysis, and a progressive integration of skills into actual play. Isn’t that what training is supposed to be for?

If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:

www.acecoach.com